

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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No. 59

DECEMBER 11TH, 1940

DEAR MEMBER,

A letter from a chaplain raises a wartime problem of the greatest interest. Many of you may be in touch with similar situations. The best plan is to let the writer state the problem in his own words:

COMMUNITY BUILDING IN WARTIME

"The regiment of Royal Artillery to which I am attached has just moved into a small South-Midland country town. I must admit that my own first reaction to the place was the conventional Army one that, since we were not here for the good of our health, it was the plain duty of the civilian population to give the regiment a good time. It was the extreme pressure upon accommodation suitable for organised activities that forced me to try to see as a whole the situation in which we found ourselves from the point of view of the townsfolk as well as from my own Army view-point.

"There are three main sections of this population now gathered together here. There is the original community of the town, very rich in local tradition and character. The population is normally around 1,000 and until recently there had been for many generations an undisturbed communal life. To this original population must now be added some 400 evacuees, mostly women. Some of these are government evacuees from the East End, but a far larger number are voluntary evacuees who are now living in the hotels, have taken houses or lodgings, or who are living with some local resident who is a relation, or as a paying guest. These have brought with them a wealth of ability and varied gifts, and have a good deal of time on their hands. There are also school children. And now there has been added our regiment of something over 600 men, former territorialists from the North-West of England.

"There seem to be four ways of reacting to the situation. First, you can let the thing settle down as best it can, unguided, unplanned, and this is of course already happening. But this is sterile and uncreative. Secondly, some feel that the old communal life of the town is something precious which should be preserved by every means; separate institutions and activities should be organised for the soldiers and the evacuees, and the life of the town fenced off so that at the end of the war its character and life will have successfully resisted the 'invasion'. Thirdly, you can try to absorb the new population into the old communal life of the town. This is a fairly common attitude amongst the leaders of local activities, who see the enlarged population as an opportunity for recruiting new members to their existing organisations. And, of course, this is happening. But it is very like putting new wine into old bottles. Fourthly, you can treat the present enlarged population, with its three constituents of local residents, evacuees, and soldiers as the stuff out of which a new communal life is to be built—a new community in which all three as equal members contribute from their resources their special gifts to the common weal.

"I know that what my men miss most is nothing so superficial as cinemas and recreation, but their homes. And their home was part of a community. The evacuees have been taken out of their communities; and the town residents have had their community broken into. All sections need a sense of community restored to them through a

common life together in which there is no patronising of one group by another, but in which there is free opportunity for all to serve, in the way best suited to them, the common well-being. When you begin to work things out against this background all sorts of things that seemed important become unimportant, and other things take a new significance. The problem from this fourth view ceases to be a problem and becomes an opportunity; an opportunity to begin to build that new England that so many dream may come out of this war."

BOOKS

Two small books have recently appeared by M. Denis Saurat, Head of the Institut Français in London. The first is called *Regeneration* (Dent. 1s.). I incline to apply to it the remark I made about Lord Eustace Percy's Matriculation Address that it is not often that one finds so much wisdom in such little space. M. Saurat is convinced that the crisis of our civilisation is in essence a religious crisis; spiritual reconstruction is the fundamental problem of our times. He has illuminating things to say also about the predicaments in which men find themselves to-day.

The other volume, *The Christ at Chartres* (Dent. 4s.) is to be recommended only to those who have a mystical strain in their make-up. It is a series of conversations of the author with a few individuals, revealing in the soul of France a deep layer of intuition which is of pre-Christian origin but has profound affinities with the Christian mysteries. Practical, matter-of-fact people will make nothing of the book, and will blame me for inducing them to waste four shillings, but those for whom the world is full of unprobed mysteries will find in it much to enlarge and deepen their understanding of life.

I invite your special attention to the postscript below.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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PREDICAMENT AND SALVATION

In the writing of the last Supplement one question immediately relevant to the present situation was reserved for fuller consideration. It is the question of the response which Christians are called to make to the basic challenge of that situation, which I take to be this: Can the Christian faith prove itself able in this historical crisis, as it did in the early centuries, to bring salvation and renewal to a society not dissimilar to that which Augustine described as "a rotting and disintegrating world"? As he looked out on it he was able to say boldly to his contemporaries, "Has paganism, I ask you, any philosophy to offer equal to ours, the one true philosophy?" Is it possible for Christians today to look the facts of the world honestly in the face and make the same confident challenge?

If we look at the world around us with unprejudiced eyes we shall not find the answer easy. The steadier our gaze and the greater our sensitiveness, the more surely shall we be thrown into discouragement and despair. From that pit we can be delivered only by the renewal in our heart of the certainty that "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." We can dare to look reality in the face only in the strength of a supernaturally given faith that God is greater than the world and is able to renew its life beyond all human possibilities.

RELIGION IN THE FORCES

As in the last war, the assembly of a large proportion of the male youth of the nation in the armed forces provides a mirror in which we can see the religious condition of the nation. After six months of the present war I reported in the News-Letter (C.N.-L. No. 25) the results of an enquiry based on letters and memoranda from more than a hundred chaplains, officers and men and many personal conversations. None of our corres-

pondents at that time put the number of practising Christians among those with whom they were in contact at more than ten per cent. of the whole. More recently I talked to a chaplain who said that out of the 2,000 men to whom he was ministering not more than ten had any vital connection with the Church. A week or two later I met another chaplain, attached to a territorial regiment, in which things were much better. He had made a card index of the religious connections of all his men and found that fifty per cent. had been confirmed and that of this fifty per cent. about a third in civil life were more or less regular communicants. A young air pilot, who joined the force at a rather older age than most, told me recently that among those in the training school where he was—boys of nineteen for the most part—not one had the smallest idea of what Christianity is and only one had any desire to learn about it. I do not suggest that this applies to the Air Force as a whole; I know that it does not.

The evidence suggests that ninety per cent. of the youth of the nation have ceased to have any living connection with Christianity, and that there is nothing to keep them from becoming a prey to any pagan force that may arise. I am told that recent enquiries in a large northern city into the relation of adolescents to the Churches revealed a similar state of affairs.

These facts are hidden in peace time from those who move in Church circles. Church activities claim all their waking hours. We cannot help thinking of the world in terms of our own experience. As a Scottish friend, himself a minister, said to me recently, the more successful a minister is in enlarging his congregation and developing its activities, the more he builds up a wall between himself and the outside world. The war breaks

down these walls and shows us things as they are.

There is no need to quarrel about percentages. Conditions admittedly vary. Put the figure, if you like, at eighty or seventy per cent. instead of ninety. It is not the exactness of the facts that matters but their *meaning*.

There is no reason why the facts should discourage us. To see our problems clearly is the first step towards finding a solution. The situation may be regarded as full of hope, if it leads to the discovery and remedy of the causes of our failure in the past. To grapple with it does not mean taking on our shoulders a burden a hundredfold greater than at present. To seize the opportunity may rather bring us release and a new access of energy by delivering us from a sense of frustration in a renewed contact with reality.

THE SPIRIT OF THE LEARNER

An essential part of the Christian task in relation to the unchurched masses is the simple, straightforward business of teaching the ignorant; of explaining what Christianity is, what are the facts on which it rests, and what it has done in the history of the world. But this large issue of national religious education must be kept for a future occasion.

I am concerned here with a deeper problem that would still remain even if the task of religious instruction were successfully accomplished. It is the widespread sense, conscious in many, unconscious in many more, that the Christian Gospel is irrelevant to life as it has actually to be lived. They cannot see where it comes in.

Where this state of mind exists, it is no good to go on repeating our message. It falls on deaf ears. Our preaching is directed for the most part to needs which the man outside the Churches does not recognise to be his needs. The Christian message makes no connection with his experience of life. If the gulf is to be bridged, the bridge must be built from both ends. We cannot start, as we normally do, from the Gospel and Christian doctrine alone. We must begin also at the other end—the end where ordinary people are. If Christianity is to become alive

we must lay aside all easy assumptions that we already *know*, and address ourselves humbly to the task of *learning* what is the real predicament of men to-day.

Christianity came to the world as an offer of *salvation*. It was good news. The proclamation of a higher ethical ideal is not good news; it only drives men to deeper despair because of their inability to reach it. The primary message of Christianity is not about what ought to be but about what is. Christianity is dogma—the revelation of a new reality, or it is nothing.

But just because of this unalterably given element in Christianity, we are always in danger of occupying our minds with this truth or doctrine in abstraction from the world of men to whom the message of salvation is addressed. The mind of the Church, as expressed in its theology and preaching, tends to be concentrated too exclusively on the history and interpretation of Christian doctrine in isolation from life. There has been no corresponding spiritual and intellectual effort to understand the true predicament of men in modern society. We tell men that they are in a particular kind of hole from which Christianity can deliver them. But the hole which we take for granted may not be the hole in which they think they are nor the hole in which they actually are. There is thus a hiatus between our preaching and their real need. It consequently passes them by.

I am not forgetting that it is no concern of Christianity to provide an answer to any questions that men may choose to ask. It has often to show them that the questions they ask are beside the mark. It challenges the assumptions out of which these questions arise. It is a call to men to rouse themselves from their torpor and trifling and face the real issues of life. But it can challenge them to a real decision only if it speaks to their actual condition.

THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE WAR

The conditions created by the war offer an opportunity for making a beginning in this task. Chaplains in the forces are brought into more direct and intimate relations with the unchurched masses than is possible in an

ordinary parish. They have the chance of listening and learning—of acquainting themselves with the real mind and real needs of the common man. Can the Church seize this unique opportunity before it passes? If it can, it may emerge from the war with the germ of a new understanding of the significance of Christianity for the world today, won out of a wrestling with the realities of human experience.

While conditions in the services offer a peculiarly promising field, there is no reason why the task need be confined to chaplains. All may share in it who have free contacts with the ordinary lay mind. Clergy are finding in the shelters opportunities of getting to know people in new ways and even, in some instances, of forming discussion groups among those who have no connection with the Church. School-masters and school-mistresses, club workers and the leaders of juvenile organisations have abundant opportunities of learning the mind and needs of the coming generation.

THE TASK

The purpose of this Supplement is to suggest that the first essential step towards the recovery of a vital Christianity, in the sense indicated in the opening paragraph, is a deliberate and patient attempt, in response to God's call in the present situation, to discover and understand the true predicament of men in modern society. Much more important than any immediate activity to which it may lead is the clear recognition of the need for a fundamental re-orientation of outlook.

M. Saurat in his small book *Regeneration* gives as the reason for believing the crisis of our civilisation to be in its essence a religious crisis that "the source of everything that happens to mankind is in the interior life of the individual." If this is true of human society as a whole, it is true also of the Church. If even a few hundred individual Christians were to accept as their life task the endeavour to learn where men actually are and what is their predicament, and to learn simultaneously how the Christian salvation meets that predicament, the leaven would spread. Theology and preaching

would be vitalised by re-established contact with men's real needs and practical activities. New impulses would be set in motion in many directions. Existing organisation and methods would be progressively transformed to meet freshly perceived needs.

Am I right in my suggestion of the point at which we have to begin in order to meet the challenge in the opening paragraph of the Supplement? Is this where the fulcrum is to be found? I shall welcome your counsel. If the response confirms me in thinking that this is the track we must follow, we shall try to plan the contents of the News-Letter with a view to giving as much help as possible in the undertaking.

Some points relating to such an effort deserve brief mention.

(1) The predicaments of men are many and various; indeed each person has his own individual predicament. But there are also predicaments that belong to a particular civilisation or age and others that are common to large classes in society.

(2) The answer to men's predicaments will never be—it never has been—a simple one. It can only be given in the laboratory of life, that is to say, in the discovery of it. The Christian has to acknowledge this and not pretend that because he is a Christian he knows the answer to the predicaments of life. What he does know is that in God there is the answer to the world's predicament. It can be *won* bit by bit—from God, but always as His gift to men, not ours.

(3) The Christian answer to a human predicament may often be indirect. I met some years ago a distinguished Dutch philosopher who was trying to bring together a group of psychologists and Christian theologians. The question he wanted to explore was this: Supposing a person suffering from some spiritual maladjustment consulted an experienced psychiatrist, what advice would the doctor, if he were a humanist, give, and what different advice, if any, would he give if he was both a good psychiatrist and a convinced Christian? His Christian understanding might make a great difference to his treatment of the patient but it would not necessarily take a theological form.

(4) The predicament of most men today

is not simply an individual predicament but a predicament of the society in which they have to live. One of the biggest questions which will meet us is that of the collective decisions and acts characteristic of modern society. At this point a host of questions arise which call for thought and common counsel; among them whether ethical conduct in modern society is a question on which the religious teacher can pronounce alone or whether the answer can be found only by pooling many types of experience.

(5) It will be our task to understand, and learn from, forms of spiritual experience which have no direct or conscious connection with Christian faith. What is it that outside of Christianity brings to men some genuine experience of salvation—a peace of mind, a victory, a joy in the service of their fellow-men, that often puts Christians to shame?

(6) We may expect to find increasingly that what delivers men from their predicaments is not an idea or truth in the abstract but its embodiment in a fellowship or community working for an end recognised to be relevant—a community of which they can become members and through that membership find salvation.

(7) We shall do well to bear in mind, and often to reflect upon, the difference of outlook and approach between those whose primary business in life is with religion and those whose immediate problems lie in the hurly-burly of secular activity. The ignoring of this difference of perspective is the cause of much confusion in regard to the relation of Christianity to the common life.

Recent studies have shown to how great an extent human understanding and thought are socially conditioned. We formulate our problems in terms of our own experience. Each individual has his own perspective, determined by his social position, education and training, occupation and interests. Unless we allow for this individual perspective in dealing with a situation, we shall not deal with it rightly.

In conferences which consider the relation

of the Christian faith to society, the initiative generally lies with the clergy, and they tend almost inevitably to bring the whole discussion within the framework of their own specifically religious approach. The problems which the layman experiences do not get on to the agenda. We shall never come to real grips with the relation of Christian faith to modern society until we recognise the existence of this clerical perspective and refuse to allow it to dominate the discussion.

(8) We shall fall into serious confusion unless we always keep clear in our minds the distinction, which Mr. T. S. Eliot suggests will persist even in a "Christian" society, between what he calls the Community of Christians and the general Christian Community. There is a vital difference between those who consciously and whole-heartedly respond to the call of Christ and are made members of a new community and the great majority who make no such response. The line may be difficult to draw in individual instances, but the difference is in principle fundamental. The Church has a concern with the predicament not only of its own members but with those of the majority outside its membership, not merely in challenging them to a Christian decision but in helping them to understand the meaning of a healthy *natural* order and in removing from their path hindrances to the good life.

(9) The situation, as I have already said, if we respond to it rightly, is one of hope. In the measure that God gives us the simplicity and steadfastness of purpose to confront the real problems of life to-day, the true voice of prophecy will begin to be heard. Where there is prophecy things begin to grow around it. When men face realities in the spirit of worship something living is born which spreads to ever widening circles. "The prophetic attitude begins at once to change facts, to make differences, to do work, and its first work is its social contagion. It begins to crystallise its environment, that is, to organise the social world upon its own principle."

J.H.O.

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